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INFO RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 0307
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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 5404
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3932
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1223
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 4001
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 1182
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3087
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7883
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5537
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0337
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2229
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 001045

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS AND PM
MCC FOR D NASSIRY AND E BURKE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/27/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: CONDITIONS FOR "UP-COUNTRY" TAMILS
DEPLORABLE, NOT IMPROVING

Classified By: Acting DCM Michael DeTar, for reasons 1.4(b, d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: There are approximately 1.5 million Tamils, mostly of Indian origin and often referred to as "Up-Country" Tamils, working on tea, rubber and coconut plantations in Sri Lanka. Plantation exports account for more than 50 percent of Sri Lanka's gross domestic product, but the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) spends less than three percent of its annual budget on Up-Country Tamil issues. The Up-Country People's Front (UPF) and the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) claim to represent the interests of Up-Country Tamils, but have not been able to effectuate significant changes for Sri Lanka's poorest citizens. Most Up-Country Tamils live on plantations in row-houses built decades ago and in desperate need of repair. Child labor is rampant, working conditions are poor, and wages are meager. Health care facilities on the plantations are often non-existent, and schools are dilapidated, overcrowded, and lack teachers. There is a significant and growing population of young Tamil men who are unable to find employment on the plantation or in neighboring towns. Local officials complain of a resulting increase in petty crime and report that, as an alternative to unemployment, some Up-Country Tamil youth have joined the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Up-Country Tamils had previously remained aloof from the ethnic conflict, but as conditions worsen and unemployment rises, this may be changing. If that happens, the Government will have failed to capitalize on an opportunity to win the hearts and minds of a peaceful population anxious to be integrated into mainstream Sri Lankan society. END SUMMARY.

A BRIEF HISTORY

12. (SBU) There are approximately 1.5 million Tamils working on tea, rubber and coconut plantations in Sri Lanka. They are often referred to as Up-Country Tamils, Estate Tamils,

Plantation Tamils and Tamils of Recent Indian Origin. Originally brought to Sri Lanka from India by the British during colonial rule, Up-Country Tamils were willing to work under conditions that Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamils were unwilling to accept. After independence in 1948, the GSL negotiated with the Government of India (GOI) over which country should extend citizenship to Up-Country Tamils. Eventually, the GOI agreed to take four of every seven Tamils back to India in several "installments."

¶3. (SBU) The remaining Up-Country Tamils were allowed to become Sri Lankan citizens, but only if they registered properly with the GSL within a prescribed period of time. Thinking that they could negotiate a better deal that would allow more Up-Country Tamils to become Sri Lankan citizens rather than return to India, Up-Country Tamil leaders urged people to boycott the registration deadline. When it became apparent that the GSL would not provide a more beneficial deal, Up-Country Tamil leaders reversed course, advocating registration, but it was too late for thousands who were unable to complete the Sinhalese-only registration forms in time to obtain citizenship. As a result, approximately 300,000 Up-Country Tamils became stateless. Under successive GSL administrations, Up-Country Tamils were eventually able to obtain Sri Lankan citizenship, with the last group registering in 2003. However, there are still thousands of Up-Country Tamils who have not successfully navigated the procedure to obtain an identification card, and as a result, are unable to vote, travel outside of their home district or obtain basic GSL services.

¶4. (SBU) Currently, there are 23 corporations managing more
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than 4,000 plantations. The GSL owns 49 percent of the stock in plantation corporations holding 47 percent of plantation lands. Fifty-three percent of plantations are referred to as "small holdings" owned and operated almost exclusively by Sinhalese living in the South. Individual ownership of plantation land by Up-Country Tamils is extremely rare. Plantation exports account for more than 50 percent of Sri Lanka's gross domestic product, but the GSL spends less than three percent of its annual budget on Up-Country Tamil issues.

INEFFECTIVE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

¶5. (SBU) Two political parties claim to represent the interests of Up-Country Tamils -- the Up-Country People's Front (UPF), with two members of Parliament (MPs) and the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), with five MPs. Both parties are members of the governing coalition. The CWC holds two ministerial positions -- Minister of Livestock Development and Estate Infrastructure Arumugan Thondaman and Deputy Minister of Estate Development Muthu Sivalingham. Each party also operates a trade union. Workers pay 35 rupees (31 cents) a month to belong to the UPF and 65 rupees (59 cents) a month for membership in the CWC.

¶6. (C) The UPF and CWC point to Up-Country Tamil citizenship as a concrete example of their efforts to improve the lives of their constituents, although both claim the other party did little to win the citizenship victory. Some, however, have criticized Up-Country Tamil politicians for failing to do more to improve the living and working conditions on plantations. Minister Thondaman is, himself, an estate owner with vast holdings. Likewise, Deputy Minister Sivalingham is a board member and shareholder of multiple plantation corporations. Because of their position as plantation owners, critics have charged that they cannot effectively represent a group of people's whose financial interests are directly opposite to their own.

MISERABLE LIVING CONDITIONS

¶7. (SBU) Most Up-Country Tamils work on tea plantations and live in rows of houses 12 units long and two deep called "line homes." They are made of wood walls and corrugated steel roofs, with concrete floors. Homes vary in size but most consist of two small rooms approximately 6 feet wide, deep and high. One room typically has a small concrete hearth where women build a fire using sticks they have gathered in their free time to cook rice and vegetables. That room may also double as a bedroom if there are too many family members living together in one line home. The plantations are in the central mountainous area of Sri Lanka, often more than 4,000 feet in elevation, where the temperature can drop as low as 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Most homes are not equipped with heat and most do not have electricity. Communal bathroom facilities are located outside the line homes.

¶8. (C) Most line homes were built decades ago and are in desperate need of repair. On July 20 and 22, Poloff met with plantation owners in Nuwara Eliya and Hatton who acknowledged that the condition of line homes is sub-standard but asserted that despite huge plantation profits, repairing line homes is the GSL's responsibility. Likewise, plantation owners, including Deputy Minister Sivalingham, assert that other quality of life issues like road conditions on the plantations, electricity to the line homes, medical facilities, waste and sanitation issues and educational

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opportunities are all the Government's responsibility.

TOUGH WORK CONDITIONS

¶9. (SBU) Officially, Up-Country Tamils are not allowed to begin working on the plantation until they are twenty years old. However, child labor is rampant. Member of Parliament Mano Ganesan, himself a Tamil of recent Indian origin, urged Poloff on July 21 to help the international community focus on illegal child labor in addition to illegal child soldiers. Most women work until age 55, and men retire at 60. After retirement, they are allowed to live in their line house until they die, a recently won right. They are expected to work from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., but in peak seasons the hours may be much longer. Regardless of the number of hours worked, tea pickers must bag 16 kilograms of tea leaves to be paid for a full day's work. Additionally, pickers must work at least 25 days a month to be eligible for the full daily rate of less than two dollars after deductions.

INADEQUATE MEDICAL AND EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES

¶10. (C) Health care facilities on the plantations are often non-existent. Pregnant women are taken to either Nuwara Eliya Hospital or Base Hospital to give birth, but infant mortality is high. Additionally, the Ministry of Health provides 500 rupees (\$4.50) to women willing to undergo voluntary sterilization after their second child. The Estate Medical Attendant (EMA) is involved in persuading women to accept sterilization and is overseen by Norwegian NGO Human Development Trust. Some Up-Country Tamil women at Pedro Plantation told Poloff on July 21 that they were sterilized without their consent after their third child. Additionally, several men at Pedro Plantation complained of forced vasectomies.

¶11. (SBU) Up-Country Tamil schools are dilapidated, overcrowded and lack teachers. The GSL recently approved funds for an additional 3,000 teachers in Nuwara Eliya district, with both the UPF and CWC claiming the accomplishment as their own. However, even with the influx of teachers, the average classroom still houses 46 students, with some holding almost twice as many. The GSL-mandated maximum number of students per classroom is 25. The facilities in Nuwara Eliya schools are also often

sub-standard. Toilet facilities are usually lacking, particularly impacting female students, and books are scarce. Additionally, transportation to schools does not operate if rains cause flooding and create sinkholes in the dirt streets.

RAMPANT UNEMPLOYMENT CREATES VULNERABLE YOUTH

¶12. (C) Because plantations need five times as many women to pick tea leaves as men to work in the processing plants, there is a significant and growing population of young Tamil men who are unable to find employment on the plantation or in neighboring towns. Nuwara Eliya city officials complain of a resulting increase in petty criminal activities. UPF Parliamentarian Radakrishnan told us that, as an alternative to unemployment, approximately 350 Up-Country Tamil youth have joined the LTTE. Politicians fear that as the war intensifies in the north, Tiger recruiters will seek to persuade more Nuwara Eliya males to join the cause, capitalizing on their dissatisfaction with living and working conditions.

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¶13. (C) COMMENT: Up-Country Tamils have a reputation for being extremely hard-working and have not previously taken sides in the ethnic conflict. Indeed, for decades Up-Country Tamils have viewed traditional Sri Lankan Tamils as rivals rather than allies. However, that view seems to be shifting, with more Up-Country Tamils speaking in fatalistic terms about having no option but to seek a better life through joining the armed conflict. If that happens, the Government will have failed to capitalize on an opportunity to win the hearts and minds of a population anxious to be integrated into mainstream Sri Lankan society.

MOORE